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THE THEOLOGIAN AND APULEIUS
THE PRIEST

A PART OF A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF THE DIVINITY SCHOOL IN
CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR
OF PHILOSOPHY

1934

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Martin Rist

Plutarch of Chaeronea, biographer, essayist, philosopher, theologian and mystic, whose long span of life was practically contemporaneous with the writing of most of the New Testament, was an initiate of the mysteries of Isis and Osiris. During the first quarter of the second century, writing as a member of the cult, he composed his work, *Concerning Isis and Osiris*, a semi-official apologetic for the Egyptian mysteries. In this apology he proposes to be a mystagogue who shall lead his readers, reverently and philosophically, to a true knowledge of the Egyptian gods and their religion, with its myth, symbols, and cultus, including the mystic initiation. He hoped in this way to dispel the ignorance and misunderstandings which were luring unwary worshipers into the quagmire of superstitious beliefs and practices and at the same time were repelling non-believers to the brink of atheism and religious indifference.

Writing as a Greek to a Hellenistic public, his first concern is to demonstrate that the so-called Egyptian gods were originally Greek deities who had migrated to Egypt in ancient times and had now returned to their native land. He proves this by an etymological exegesis, showing that their names are actually Greek and not Egyptian. Furthermore, by a familiar process of theocrasia he identifies these supposedly Egyptian gods with leading Greek deities. As a matter of fact, these gods are neither Greek nor Egyptian, but just as sun, moon, and ocean are common to all people, Greek and Barbarian, so these gods, though worshiped by different peoples under different names, are universal and the common gods of all.

In introducing his interpretation he gives a summary of the Osirian myth; the crude, primitive, and anthropomorphic legend from which the doctrines and cultus were derived. He warns his readers against a literal acceptance of this myth as dangerous since this leads to superstition. Nor is it to be interpreted in the manner of the Euhemerists, who fall into the error of humanizing the gods, averring that the sacred story relates the deeds of humans, heroes

of a past age who have been deified by later generations. To counteract this atheistic explanation Plutarch proposes that the myth is not about gods or humans, but actually is a true, historical account of the lives and deeds of daemons who, by reason of their great virtue, became gods indeed.

This daimonic theory is at variance with his main argument that the myth is not to be regarded literally as true and historical but is to be considered as a religious allegory. He bases this methodology on the proposition that the Egyptian priests, who were so wise that the Greek poets, statesmen, and philosophers studied at their temples, composed the sacred story as a cloak for their invaluable religious and philosophical truths, leaving in it hints concerning its actual nature. According to his logic, if the myth is allegorized reverently and philosophically it will be resolved into the original teaching of the priests and its hidden truths will be revealed.

Following this line of approach he presents various rival interpretations, largely Stoic and Pythagorean, which were current in his day. He rejects these, for the most part, save as they confirm what he says is a basic and universally accepted truth, that the harmony of the universe depends upon the continual opposition of the principle of Good and the principle of Evil, typified in the myth by the conflicts of Osiris and Typhon. This prepares the way for his own interpretation, based upon a thoroughly dualistic and idealistic world view, professedly derived from Plato's *Timaeus*, but actually the product of a philosophical synthesis. Osiris, of course, is the principle of Good, the supreme Being, the pure and primal substance above all corruption and change. He is also the male or generative principle, constantly emitting ideas and images of himself. In the World Soul he is Intelligence (Nous) and Reason (Logos); in the visible world all that is good, beneficial, and orderly is his manifestation. Typhon, the implacable enemy of Osiris, is his direct opposite. He is the principle of Evil; in the World Soul he is all that is unreasonable, passionate, and brutal, while in the realm of nature he is the capricious, disorderly, and corrupt element. The power of the Good is greater than that of the Evil, but the latter cannot be wholly destroyed, for its opposition is necessary for harmony. Isis represents Matter, which is divine, and as the female or receptive principle she longs for and pursues Osiris, the principle of the Good, and receiving his emissions she conceives and produces Horus, who is the Cosmos or organized world, the perishable image of the Intelligible which, however, is eternally renewed. These three, Osiris the Father, Isis the Mother, and Horus their Son, form a divine family, the sacred godhead of the Egyptians. Other details of the myth are

integrated into Plutarch's allegory with considerable ingenuity, so that *Concerning Isis and Osiris* came to be recognized by both pagans and Christians as a masterpiece of allegorical interpretation.

In addition to his philosophical allegory of the myth, Plutarch also explains various rites, customs, and symbols of the cult; such as animal worship, the wearing of linen robes, the sistrum, and other matters that were frequently misunderstood. All this, however, is introductory to his climax, hinted at in the opening chapters and reserved for the end of the book, his interpretation of the mystic initiations themselves. Plutarch was apparently acquainted with secret rites which centered in a dramatic and realistic presentation of the myth, during which the death of Osiris, the sufferings and wanderings of Isis, and the resurrection of Osiris to be judge of the dead, were reenacted. Sometime during the rites the initiate himself recapitulated the history of Osiris, died, went to the lower world where he saw the gods, and was reborn to a glorious and an immortal existence. This, according to normative cult practice, was a realistic and objective experience, in which the gods were regarded in anthropomorphic fashion.

In place of this objective mysticism Plutarch proposes a subjective mystical experience. According to him, the greatest gift that man can ask is to obtain a "knowledge" or *gnosis* of God. This, Plutarch avers, may be obtained through the mystic rites, which Isis has established for suffering humanity. In them she gathers up the sacred Logos (Osiris) which had been scattered by Typhon, and imparts the Logos to her initiates. The soul of man is imprisoned and polluted by his body, and in this state can have no intercourse with Osiris, the transcendent Logos and divine Reason. But in the course of the initiation the soul of the individual, guided by the divine Logos it has received, obtains a glimpse or *gnosis* of Osiris, who shines through momentarily like a flash of lightning. This momentary illumination is anticipatory of life after death, when the soul which has been guided by Reason in life is liberated and migrates to the pure and invisible regions where it may contemplate the beauty of Osiris without satiation. Thus, through his gnostic interpretation of the secret rites, Plutarch has disavowed not only an objective mystic experience but also the materialistic concept of judgment and life after death which characterized the Egyptian mysteries.

A review of Plutarch's theological writings reveals that he has interpreted the myth and cultus of the Egyptian religion to conform to his own metaphysical presuppositions; which were a composite of Platonism, Stoicism, and Pythagoreanism, with an increment of

Oriental speculation. Subtract the Egyptian myth and cultus from Plutarch's allegory, and the remainder will be a summary of his theological teaching in general. Furthermore, the subjective, gnostic illumination, which according to Plutarch is the culmination of the Egyptian secret rites, follows a definite mystical behavior pattern. This is to be found in a number of passages in the *Moralia*, not only in relation to other mystery cults, but also as a characteristic of the phenomenon of divination or as an accompaniment of the worship of Apollo at Delphi, where Plutarch was a priest. Finally, and most significantly, although Plutarch denies that this experience can be obtained by the mystic without the aid of philosophy, the philosophically trained individual may acquire it by the means of philosophy alone, without recourse to theurgy or mystic rites of any kind.

Plutarch's integration of the Egyptian religion into a Hellenistic pattern of theology and mysticism no doubt was an important and effective apologetic for this foreign cult in the Graeco-Roman world; but the mystical experience which he advocated, fundamentally gnostic in character and actually attainable independently of cultus and mystic initiation, constituted a potential threat to the organized religion he had chosen to defend.

Wholly different in form, content, and purpose is the *Metamorphoses* of Apuleius of Madaura, sophist and Platonist, written a generation or so after Plutarch's death. The *Metamorphoses* is a religious novel or allegory, based upon a current Greek tale concerning a certain Lucius who was turned into an ass, and after a number of strange adventures, some erotic, some ludicrous, and others toilsome, shameful, and even dangerous, was restored to his human form by eating a rose. Apuleius, writing as a leading priest of one of the oldest and most important temples of Isis in Rome, freely paraphrasing, expanding, and interpolating the Greek original, has adapted the story to religious purposes by relating it in its entirety to the Egyptian mysteries, concluding with a description of his own mystical experiences during his initiation.

Before considering the religious significance of the entire work it should be noted that in addition to the Isiac conclusion at least two important interpolations reveal a definite interest of the adaptor in the Egyptian cult. The first, occurring in the second book, describes a necromancy performed by a prophet of the goddess Isis. The second, comprising the middle one-sixth of the *Metamorphoses*, is the celebrated story of Cupid and Psyche. This allegory, like the *Metamorphoses* itself, is a religious adaptation of a popular tale recast so as to culminate in a mystic initiation, in this instance the secret rites of Harpocrates, the infant son

of Isis, who was commonly identified in the Graeco-Roman world with Cupid, Isis herself being frequently equated with Venus.

The allegorical significance of the *Metamorphoses* itself (as well as the otherwise inexplicable adaptation of the story of Lucius the ass-man to religious ends) depends upon the animal cultus of the Egyptian mysteries, in which the ass symbolized Set-Typhon the god of evil; who was also regarded in Hellenistic circles as cruel, blind fate, whereas Isis was considered to be good fortune. Accordingly, with this animal symbolism in mind, Apuleius utilizes the story of Lucius, recasting it so that Lucius, while in the ass's body, typifies a human soul (his own, in fact) in bondage to Typhon (literally he is "in Typhon"), while the hardships, misfortunes, dangers, and degradation which befell Lucius serve to represent the unhappy, miserable lot of the soul that was in the power of the god of evil. The intercession of Isis whereby Lucius shed his ass's skin and received in its place a white linen robe is typified by the eating of the rose which in the adaptation of Apuleius is given to him by an Isiac priest. This transformation is a realistic symbolization of the secret initiation through which the initiate dies to an evil, bestial, miserable, and mortal life under the control of Typhon, and is reborn to a pure, blessed, and immortal existence as a follower and servant of Isis. Had the purpose of Apuleius been merely that of religious edification he might have concluded with this symbolic portrayal of the mystic rites. However, writing under the pseudonym of Lucius he adds a description of his own initiation, first at Cenchreae and later at Rome.

This account of the rites, important for many reasons, is particularly significant because of the ecclesiastical interest betrayed by Apuleius. This is disclosed in a most striking manner in his naive apologetic for the heavy costs of the rites, for he avers that in addition to religious satisfactions he received ample financial rewards as a result of his initiation. Another sign of his priestly viewpoint is discovered in the liturgical elements pervading his account, for even the prayers and speeches which are represented as ecstatic and spontaneous follow stereotyped forms and phrases similar to those found in extant Isiac liturgies. However, it is in his description of the visions accompanying the mystic rites that Apuleius most clearly betrays his priestly hand.

To turn by way of comparison to certain Platonic passages in his other works we discover that Apuleius believes in invisible, incorporeal gods, and in a supreme God of all, thoroughly incorporeal and transcendent, who is divine Intelligence. Normally man can have no intercourse with the gods, since his soul is imprisoned and defiled by the body. However, through the medium of philosophical

discipline, which he compares with mystic initiations, the soul may be freed temporarily from the body, and during this momentary experience the incorporeal gods, even the divine Intelligence itself, flash through the soul like light. Philosophy is also a preparation for the future life, for at death the soul of the philosopher more readily than that of any other individual migrates to the gods where it receives the reward of a pure and chaste life. Accordingly, Apuleius, writing as a Platonist, approves of a mystic experience which is practically identical with the gnostic illumination which Plutarch describes as the product of philosophy or as the result of a philosophical interpretation of initiation into the mysteries, particularly those of Isis and Osiris.

However, when Apuleius writes as a priest of Isis he abandons his philosophical concept of mystical experience and describes his mystical experiences as a member of the Egyptian mysteries in a normative objective and anthropomorphic manner. The gods appear to him in human form, and converse with him, giving him advice and comfort. During the initiation itself he quite realistically reenacts the passion of Osiris, and upon his happy return from the lower world he is adorned like Osiris-Ra and is regarded as an immortal being. In fact, there is nothing in the thoroughly objective mysticism of the *Metamorphoses* to recall the Platonist who as a philosopher advocates a purely subjective mystical experience. However, there are some indications in his metaphysical passages that Apuleius required a certain amount of objectivity in his worship, for when worshipping his highest and most incorporeal God, divine Intelligence, he customarily addressed this metaphysical deity through a small idol which he carried about with him. The normative nature of his Isiac mysticism is disclosed in the fact that the gods appear to him in forms and costumes resembling their extant images and by the additional circumstance that the visions directly connected with the initiations follow a stereotyped pattern which is also basic to the symbolical account of the initiation of Lucius.

The hieratic interest of Apuleius is most clearly shown in his emphasis of the ecclesiastical control which is exercised over the neophyte. Some days prior to the initiation the candidate is required to live in the temple area where he participates in the religious services, learns the hymns and prayers and contemplates the images of the gods. During this residence he frequented the company of the priests, who gave him instruction and advice, interpreted his visions, and in general controlled his activities. No doubt, through the power of suggestion provided by this environment the nature and the content of the mystical experience were predetermined by the cult authorities. In view of this

priestly control it is possible that Apuleius' description of his own initiations may be substantially a true account, modified to some extent by his priestly recollection of these events. It must be evident that in the *Metamorphoses* this priest of Isis is giving his sanction to the normative type of mystical experience that was amenable to cult control. Thus Apuleius used his influence as a priest of the cult and his prestige as an acknowledged leader of Platonism to counteract the spread of a gnostic mystical behavior, which was independent of cult control, such as was advocated by Plutarch for the mystic initiation, by giving his endorsement to the normative cult experience.

In conclusion, this study is related to the study of early Christianity by the acceptance of the proposition that Christianity almost from the beginning was the product of a Hellenistic, not of a Jewish environment and accordingly its early phenomena are to be understood against the background of its Hellenistic *milieu*. In line with this methodology this study of the mystical behavior of two initiates in a Hellenistic cult that was a serious rival of early Christianity is presented as a partial control in the investigation of the religious experience of their Christian contemporaries. Furthermore, the religious apologetic of Plutarch for the Egyptian mysteries, in which he relies upon allegorical interpretation to further his argument, may be compared with the Christian apologies, some of which reveal an acquaintance with Plutarch's writings. Finally, the effort of the Isis cult to control the mystic experiences of its members may be compared with the attempts of Christian leaders of the same period to counteract the disintegrating tendencies of gnosticism and other forms of uncontrolled mysticism.

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